



United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

helping people help the land

Gragnani Wetland



"We weren't making any money farming it. It had a tendency to flood."
- Don Gragnani, Farmer

Don Gragnani loves his farm, especially now that he receives thousands of visitors to it every year. But his property near Helm, Calif. isn't exactly a hot spot for human tourists.

Gragnani's visitors are ducks and other wildlife that are finding their way to more than 6,000 acres he's converted back into a wetland.



Water spreading across the wetland is sometimes only inches deep and hidden from view by plants and grasses. (all photos by Brian Ziegler)

Gragnani is among dozens of farmers in California who have entered into wetland restoration easements with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). The agency's Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) allows a farmer to continue owning his property after selling the easement rights but not farm it. Easements are either permanent or locked in for 30 years.

Gragnani enjoys seeing ibis, pelicans, geese and egrets where he used to raise sugar beets, cotton and barley. Because of this, he has added another 1,700 acres to the wetland. He's quick to say business was a key motivation for selling the easement to NRCS. "We weren't making any money farming it. None of the crops were high dollar. We couldn't grow grapevines or trees. It had a tendency to flood," said Gragnani.



Heavy machinery creates shallow depressions in a field where the wetland is being constructed.

The restoration

program pays for itself, NRCS Biologist **Elizabeth Palmer** said. "Benefits include creating masses of land where water can be stored to prevent flooding of communities or other farmland that could result in disaster payments." A farmer who sells the easement for wetlands retains other rights to the land and can recoup some of the cost of maintaining it by opening it to sportsmen.

Gragnani's latest addition was designed by NRCS Engineer **Jon Chilcote**. Plans called for carving channels, creating islands, building levees, installing water control structures and building ponds. "It is a huge area with tall vegetation and shrink and swell soils so the surveying was fairly involved," said Chilcote. "There are a lot of cultural resources around the site that we needed to avoid." How does he feel about the project? "We're bringing the wildlife habitat back to the way it used to be. That's pretty neat."



NRCS Engineer Jon Chilcote (left) and Biologist Richard Rivas use a Global Positioning System device to stakeout wetland construction.